



Twenty Years to Oslo

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The abject failure of the Oslo Accords has had a salutary effect on Israeli society. Israelis are today quite resilient; ready to endure – if necessary – protracted conflict, until the Palestinians adopt reasonable positions. Israelis are also quite understandably unwilling to make dangerous concessions to the Palestinians.

The Oslo process – started between Israel and the Palestinians 20 years ago – clearly failed to bring a resolution to the conflict, and did not result in a peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians. The nearly 1,500 Israeli casualties and many more thousands of wounded during this period by Palestinian terrorist and rocket attacks testify to this failure. Former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's land-for-security formula did not work. Moreover, the Palestinian Authority (PA), established within the framework of the Oslo process, now rules in the West Bank and promotes anti-Israel hatred through its education system and controlled media. Furthermore, Hamas, an Islamist organization dedicated to destroy the Jewish state, rules Gaza, continuing the armed struggle against Israel.

The current peace negotiations are unlikely to change the status quo. The chances that they will lead to the establishment of a stable, unified, and peaceful Palestinian state are nil. The differences in positions, particularly on refugees and Jerusalem, are unbridgeable. Moreover, the PA has displayed considerable difficulties in state building, and the resulting entity borders on a failed state. It failed to meet the essential test of statehood, monopoly over the use of force, and subsequently lost control over part of its territory, Gaza. It is hard to imagine the PA surviving without the infusion of billions of dollars of international aid. The PA mirrors the deep socio-economic and political crisis of several Arab states, putting a big question mark on the

capacity of the Arab political culture to sustain modern states. Finally, both sides of the ethno-religious conflict still have the energy to fight over the things important to them. Such protracted conflicts usually end only if at least one side displays great weariness of the conflict.

Therefore, twenty years after Oslo we are left with the entrenchment of two revisionist Palestinian national movements, one traditional and one Islamist, in parts of Palestine. Palestinian-controlled territories are nothing more than local bases of terror against Israel. Yet, Palestinian terror has largely been contained and more vigorous Israeli actions could further limit its impact on Israeli lives.

The Palestinian ability to exact great political cost is somewhat exaggerated as long as Israel benefits from moderate American diplomatic support. Appeals to ineffective international forums can be ignored, while some international institutions have only limited impact. Similarly, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign has largely failed, although some of its long-range ramifications should be a source of concern. Significantly, most world states prefer not to link their bilateral relations with Israel to the oscillations in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Moreover, the awareness that the Palestinians are not ripe for statehood has slowly spread into foreign policy decision-making forums. Subsequently, we also can detect greater international indifference to the Palestinian issue, particularly among Arab states, as plenty of crises in the Middle East and elsewhere attract greater attention.

All of the above means that the conflict with the Palestinians will not end any time soon, but that the situation is bearable. Israel's strategy in the past decade, conflict management rather than conflict resolution, should continue. Israel must display willingness to negotiate boldly and make concessions. In fact, the continuing turmoil in the Middle East sensitizes the international community to Israel's security needs, which reduces pressures for meeting impossible Palestinian territorial demands.

Israel must also point out that the fractured Oslo process has brought about one more partition of Palestine (the Land of Israel). The first partition, imposed by the British colonial power, took place in 1922, when 75 percent of mandatory Palestine, the area east of the Jordan River, was taken away from the Jewish national home to be given to a throne-less Hashemite to establish the Jordanian Kingdom. A second partition, this time of western Palestine, was the result of the Arab conquests in the 1948 War (Jordan took control of the "West Bank" and Egypt of the Gaza Strip), leading to the so-called "1967 borders," which were actually erased following the Arab aggression in 1967.

The Oslo process amounts to a third partition because it led to a situation where eventually more than 95 percent of the Palestinians in the West Bank and all of the Palestinians in Gaza are living under Palestinian rule. As we have seen in other parts of the world, partitions can be messy and without clear-cut political outcomes. The limited Israeli military presence in the West Bank is only marginally concerned with the welfare of the Palestinians; the security of the Israelis is its main goal. Israel is no longer responsible for the Palestinians and they are on their own. Despite the anti-Israel rhetoric, the “occupation” of the Palestinians has practically ended. Anyone visiting Ramallah, with its cafes and shopping centers, can see it for himself.

While the Oslo process failed to attain peace and security for Israel, it was conducive to a partition of the Land of Israel, relieving Israel of the Palestinian burden. Most Israelis have supported the traditional Zionist pro-partition position. They also supported the withdrawal from Gaza and the establishment of a security barrier that signal a desire to disengage from territories heavily populated by Arabs.

Israeli society paid dearly for the Oslo experiment. It can honestly say, “We tried to make peace with the Palestinians,” which is a prerequisite for treating future armed conflict as a “no-choice (*Ein Breira*) war.” Such an attitude, prevalent during the Oslo years, has been central in forging great Israeli resilience to withstand protracted conflict, and an unwillingness to make dangerous concessions.

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